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The use of the Internet by political parties and candidates in Scotland during the 2010 UK general election campaign

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper reports the results of a study which investigated the use of the Internet by political parties and individual candidates in Scotland as part of their campaign for election to the UK Parliament in 2010.

Design/methodology/approach – Three methodologies were used in gathering data: (1) the content of the websites of 18 parties and 12 candidates was analysed in order to identify the ways in which participation by the Scottish electorate was encouraged via the provision of information and of opportunities for interaction, debate and feedback; (2) the extent to which parties and candidates adopted and used social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, during the campaign was investigated and measured; and (3) using email, Facebook and Twitter, a series of enquiries based around topical campaign and policy issues was directed at parties and candidates to measure the speed and extent of response, as well as any efforts made towards the creation of an ongoing relationship with potential voters.

Findings – Party and candidate websites were being used extensively for information provision, income generation and the recruitment of members and volunteers. However, Scottish political actors were reluctant to encourage online contact and debate, and were unwilling to answer contentious policy questions online. Social media applications were adopted by a significant number of parties and candidates, but were used primarily for the one-way flow of information to known associates and party activists.

Originality/value – This study forms part of an ongoing series of investigations by the authors, which has examined the use of the Internet by political parties and candidates during parliamentary election campaigns in Scotland. These are the only such studies which have looked specifically at the Scottish political arena.

Keywords Internet, Elections, Political parties, Candidates, Scotland

Paper type Research paper

Introduction and background

Since the influential Bill Clinton and Al Gore campaign during the 1992 United States presidential election, the Internet has been adopted as an electoral tool by an increasing range of political actors worldwide. Indeed, as Norris (2003) pointed out, the mid-1990s witnessed a general wave of enthusiasm about the potential impact of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the political sphere: many commentators believed that the Internet facilitated a new, more participatory style of politics, which would bring politicians and an increasingly disaffected electorate closer together, and would draw more people into the democratic process. However, by the end of the twentieth century, these Utopian claims were being questioned by a second wave of more sceptical voices. Margolis and Resnick (2000,

p. vii), for example, argued that the Internet, far from revolutionising political communication and participation, simply reflected and reinforced patterns of behaviour in the real world, concluding that politics on the Internet was “politics as usual, conducted mostly by the same familiar candidates, interest groups, and news media”.

Certainly, in terms of electoral campaigning, a succession of studies internationally established that political parties and candidates tend to use the Internet as a top-down channel for information or party propaganda, rather than as an opportunity to encourage two-way discussion and debate with potential voters (see, for example, Gibson and Ward, 2002; Gibson *et al.*, 2003; Jankowski *et al.*, 2005). In the United Kingdom, more specifically, a number of studies conducted during the 1997, 2001 and 2005 general election campaigns (e.g., Auty and Nicholas, 1998; Auty and Cowen, 2001; Bowers-Brown and Gunter, 2002; Stanyer, 2005; Jackson, 2007), the 2000 and 2008 London Mayoral elections (Auty and Cowen, 2000; Williamson *et al.*, 2010), and the 1999 and 2004 European Parliament campaigns (Gibson and Ward, 2000; Ward, 2005) discovered that, while parties’ and candidates’ websites have progressively become more extensive in content and sophisticated in design, their focus has been on information provision and, more recently, on resource generation (i.e., in terms of members, volunteers and financial donations), rather than on participation and interactivity. The present authors discovered a similar situation when investigating the use of the Internet by political parties and candidates during the campaigns for election to the Scottish Parliament in 2003 and 2007 (Marcella *et al.*, 2004; Marcella *et al.*, 2008). These studies found considerable variation between parties and between individual candidates in both their capacity and their willingness to seize the potential of the Internet as a campaign tool: whilst some used ICTs in quite sophisticated ways, the majority appeared to be reluctant to engage in interactive, open, dynamic forms of electronic communication with the electorate.

More recently, a new wave of optimism has begun to emerge, prompted largely by developments in the United States where, for example, Howard Dean’s ultimately doomed presidential candidacy campaign in 2004 (Hindman, 2005), and, in particular, Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign (Graff, 2009) harnessed new, more interactive, Web 2.0 technologies to raise campaign funds and create networks of volunteers and supporters. Although the Obama team’s methods appeared to have only a limited impact on the first major UK electoral campaign that followed, for the 2009 European Parliament elections, (Jackson and Lilleker, 2010), many observers (e.g., Helm, 2010; Swaine, 2010; Warman, 2010) predicted that the 2010 UK general election would finally be *the* “digital election”, where political parties and candidates would make extensive use of ICTs, particularly new social media tools, in an effort to engage voters, widen participation and mobilise support.

With this in mind, the present authors conducted a comparative follow-up study to those they carried out during the Scottish Parliamentary campaigns in 2003 and 2007, in order to ascertain whether these technological developments had had any impact upon actors in the Scottish political arena, and whether they were now more positive in providing interactive and participatory opportunities. This paper will present the main results of the 2010 study, and will make some comparisons with the research carried out in 2003 and 2007.

Methodology

In order to facilitate comparison, this study was designed on similar lines to those conducted during the 2003 and 2007 Scottish Parliamentary campaigns. It consisted of three main elements.

Firstly, during the five weeks immediately preceding the election date of 6 May 2010, the content of the websites of all of the political parties fielding candidates in Scottish constituencies in the UK Parliamentary election was examined and analysed, where such websites existed. In fact, 18 (90%) of the 20 parties contesting the election in Scotland had some form of web presence, a very similar proportion to that found during the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary campaign (27 of 31; 87%). It should be emphasised here that the authors' two previous studies had focused on the efforts of the *Scottish* party machinery; therefore, for comparative purposes, the website analysis presented here is based largely on the content of distinctly *Scottish* party sites, again where these existed. For example, each of the three major UK-wide parties – Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat – maintains a separate Scottish party website. One interesting difference from the 2007 campaign was the lack of dedicated campaign websites amongst the Scottish political parties. In 2007, in addition to their permanent party websites, three parties operated separate, temporary, campaign websites for the duration of the contest; however, in 2010, none of the parties adopted this approach.

This analysis also excludes the content of the internal, UK-wide social network sites established by the Labour (members.labour.org.uk) and Conservative (www.myconservatives.com) parties, as these are discussed elsewhere (Newman, 2010). Designed to emulate the success of the Obama 2008 campaign, in terms of mobilising volunteers, these sites are aimed primarily at party members and activists. A brief examination indicated that Labour's Scottish candidates were making minimal use of their internal network, while just 11 of the 58 Conservative candidates in Scotland had a presence on their equivalent site, and were using it in an attempt to secure donations and assistance with canvassing and leaflet deliveries.

In addition to the party websites, the content of the websites of 12 individual candidates was analysed. As was the case during the 2003 and 2007 studies, it proved difficult to find active websites for individual candidates. As will be discussed in more detail later, the party websites were not particularly helpful in directing visitors to their candidates' personal websites: therefore the researchers relied largely on Google searches to identify such sites. An additional factor here was the fact that parliamentary rules prohibited current Members of Parliament (MPs) (i.e., those forming part of the 2005-2010 UK Parliament) from using existing websites which were paid for using their parliamentary communications allowance and which promoted their work as MPs for electioneering purposes. Although some MPs had created new additional campaign websites, the majority had either removed or suspended their existing website. Of the 347 candidates standing in the Scottish constituencies, 93 (26.8%) were found to be operating a website during the campaign; and from these a cross-party sample of 12 sites (belonging to four existing MPs and eight new candidates) was drawn for analysis. Together with the 18 party websites, these were analysed in terms of the ways in which they:

- provided information;
- attempted to generate interest in the campaign;
- kept the electorate up to date with campaign news;
- promoted the parties and the individual candidates;
- tried to engage the support of website visitors;
- provided opportunities for online interaction and debate.

The second element of the study was an analysis of the extent to which parties and candidates were using new social media applications during the campaign. While many of the party websites provided clear links to *party* social media sites, they were again less than helpful in directing users to those of their individual candidates. Here, therefore, the researchers relied on Google searches and on the search engines within Facebook and Twitter to identify candidate sites. Just 7 of the 20 parties had one or more distinctly *Scottish* social media sites, while 129 (37.2%) of the 347 candidates were found to have some form of active social media presence. This paper provides some basic analyses of these sites: in terms of their content, the number of “friends” or “followers”, and the extent of online activity in each one. A more in-depth analysis of the *nature* of the information provision and exchange on these sites is currently being undertaken by the authors.

The third and final element of the study was a series of enquiries on a range of topical campaign and policy issues directed at the email addresses, websites and social media pages of parties and individual candidates. In making these enquiries, the researchers sought to measure the speed at which parties and candidates responded, as well as any efforts made to create an ongoing relationship with potential voters. For this stage of the study an element of covert research was used where the research team, although using their real names, created special Google Mail and Twitter accounts and modified existing personal Facebook pages, disguising the fact that they were academic researchers and giving no indication of their geographic location, to conceal the fact that they may not be based in the individual candidates’ potential parliamentary constituency. This was felt necessary in order to ensure that the parties’ and candidates’ behaviour, in terms of responding to potential voters’ enquiries, remained normal and consistent.

Content analysis of party and candidate websites

Before proceeding to discuss the results of the website content analysis, it would perhaps be appropriate to provide some further information about the UK Parliamentary election process in Scotland, and the parties participating in the 2010 election. Fifty-nine constituency seats were being contested in Scotland in 2010, with one candidate being chosen to represent each constituency using the “first past the post” system, where the candidate with the most votes in each constituency becomes its MP. In the 2010 election, 20 parties fielded candidates in Scotland. These included the four major parties that have traditionally dominated the Scottish political arena: the Labour Party, the Scottish National Party (SNP), the Conservative Party, and the Liberal Democrat Party, who each fielded candidates in all 59 seats; they included parties that have had a growing influence in Scottish politics in recent years (particularly in the Scottish Parliamentary setting), such as the Scottish Green Party, who had candidates standing in a significant proportion of the seats; and they included a number of minority/fringe parties, some of which were campaigning on very

specific issues, and who were presenting only one or two candidates. Also standing were 15 independent candidates, with no party affiliations.

A full list of the 20 parties can be found in the appendix to this paper. The appendix itself provides a breakdown of the content analysis of the 18 party and 12 candidate websites, under the five broad headings of information provision, communication and interactivity, membership and donations, audiovisual features, and other interactive features. These are all discussed in more detail below.

Information provision

In terms of providing information about their chosen candidates, 16 of the 18 parties with a website provided at least some details of all of their candidates on that site. The exceptions were the Scottish Christian Party and Scotland Against Crooked Lawyers; with these two parties, and the two parties with no web presence, the research team had to rely on online media sites, such as the BBC News website, to obtain candidate information. Table I illustrates the candidate details appearing on the websites of the four major parties.

Table I: Details of constituency candidates on the four major parties' websites				
Candidates' details	Labour (n=59)	SNP (n=59)	Lib Dems (n=59)	Conservative (n=58¹)
Name	59	59	59	58
Biographical information	55	57	59	54
Photograph	58	59	59	37
Link to personal website	31	3	12	7
Link(s) to personal social media pages	4	1	3	4

¹ A few days before the election date of 6 May 2010, the Conservative Party suspended one of their candidates, for making homophobic comments on his personal website, and removed his name from the party website.

As can be seen, all provided full lists of candidate names and, with the exception of the Conservative Party, biographical details and photographs of all or the vast majority of these individuals. This is in sharp contrast to the situation in 2007, when the Labour, Conservative and Scottish National parties provided neither biographies nor photographs of any of their constituency candidates during the Scottish Parliamentary campaign. Of the four main parties, the Labour Party appeared to make the greatest effort to connect visitors to the personal websites of their individual candidates, and while significant numbers of the four main parties' candidates were using social media tools during the campaign (as will be seen in more detail later), links to these sites were lacking on the parties' websites.

Table II: Details of constituency candidates on the websites of the five other parties with ten or more candidates					
Candidates' details	BNP (n=13)	Green (n=20)	SSP (n=10)	TUSC (n=10)	UKIP (n=27)
Name	13 ¹	20	10	10	27
Biographical information	0	15	9	0	3
Photograph	0	0 ²	9	1	20
Link to personal website	0	0	1	0	0
Link(s) to personal social media pages	2	1	2	0	4

¹ Details found only on a party news release.

² Candidate photographs were provided during the early stages of the campaign, but disappeared after the website was redesigned and relaunched midway through the campaign.

Amongst the smaller parties fielding ten or more candidates (see Table II), biographies were more common on the websites of the Scottish Greens and the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), while candidate photographs were more frequent on the sites of the SSP and the UK Independence Party (UKIP). In contrast, the British National Party (BNP) provided only the names of their 13 candidates, and these were far from prominent on the website, being located only after some difficulties in a press release. It would appear, therefore, that a number of the minority parties expected the online electorate to make their democratic choice based on minimal personal information about their candidates.

In terms of policy information, 14 of the 18 party websites contained documents described as the party's election manifesto, although, unsurprisingly, these varied greatly in length, from the Conservatives' 124 pages to the Landless Peasants' 300 words. The Scottish Christian Party, meanwhile, provided a link to a "draft" manifesto, dated November 2009, but a final version was never made available online. It should be noted here that the three major UK-wide parties – Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Conservative – in addition to their main election manifesto, each created a distinct *Scottish* manifesto to reflect the fact that many of the policy areas on which they were basing their campaigns (e.g., education and health) are devolved policy areas, and the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament and Government rather than the UK Parliament and Government. It was these Scottish manifestos that appeared on the Scottish party websites. On the candidate websites, only one, that of a Labour candidate, contained a party manifesto. Although the provision of election manifestos was not universal amongst the party websites, all 18 sites did provide other forms of policy statements and commentaries, as did 7 of the 12 candidates' websites – a situation almost identical to that encountered in 2007.

With regard to the provision of campaign news, while a greater proportion of the parties (17 of 18) had news sections on their websites, compared with the previous two studies, just six of these parties (generally the larger ones) regularly updated these pages during the five-week period. Using a new technological feature not encountered in the previous studies, four party websites also provided real-time feeds from UK, Scottish, or local branch party social media sites. Similarly, although only 4 of the 12 candidate websites provided regularly updated news pages during the campaign, a

further 2 did attempt to compensate for this by providing feeds from their personal social media sites.

In 2003, when the authors conducted the first of these studies, RSS feeds were in their infancy, and none was encountered. By the time of the 2007 study, however, 6 parties and one of the 12 sample candidates had introduced such feeds, where website users were notified automatically when new content was added to the sites. In 2010, while the number of parties (7) using RSS feeds was similar to that in 2007, half of the 12 sample candidate sites now included such a feature.

Meanwhile, just four of the parties and four of the candidates provided some form of campaign calendar or diary where website visitors could find out about forthcoming events, such as public meetings or door-to-door canvassing in particular areas. The parties' campaign calendars, in particular, did not appear to be kept up-to-date: the Labour Party's, for example, was subscription- and postcode-based, with notifications of events being sent to subscribers only, and on a fortnightly basis. On the whole, then, there was clear evidence that the parties were failing to update their websites in a way that might encourage voters to revisit these sites throughout the campaign.

Six of the 18 parties and 2 of the 12 candidates indicated that they provided free electronic newsletters by subscription and, while efforts were made to subscribe to all of these services, regular campaign updates were received only from the Scottish Greens and the BNP. Nothing was sent by the others, with the exception of a six-months-old Christian Party newsletter. It would appear, therefore, that little attention is paid by parties to the e-newsletter as a dissemination tool during busy campaign periods.

The 2010 campaign saw the emergence of social bookmarking features on parties' and candidates' websites; in particular the provision of "buttons" which allowed website users to immediately share news articles and documents with others, using social bookmarking and social media services such as Delicious, Digg, Reddit and Facebook. Four party and five candidate websites included these buttons; although, of the four major parties, only Labour made such provision.

In terms of the inclusion of blogs as an integral feature of parties' and candidates' websites, the situation appeared to have changed little since 2007, when blogs were first emerging as a campaign tool in Scotland. The websites of five parties and five candidates contained blogs, although these were generally not updated regularly, and either did not permit comments or required an additional registration process in order for comments to be submitted. It should be noted, however, that the 2010 study, for the first time, also included a systematic examination of all candidates' separate blog sites (i.e., those blogs not incorporated within a personal website), where these existed, and these will be discussed briefly later in this paper.

One particularly disappointing aspect of the 2010 study was the lack of information provided in alternative formats or languages, aimed at website users with a disability or whose first language is not English. Just three parties and one of the candidates made any reference to information in alternative formats, and although this was a similar number to that encountered in 2007 their efforts paled somewhat in comparison. For example, the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary campaign had seen a

Gaelic version of an entire party website, minority language versions of manifestos, and a video clip of an election address, complete with subtitles and British Sign Language interpreting; in comparison the 2010 study uncovered only a text version of Labour's Scottish manifesto, for visually impaired website visitors to use with screen readers, a Google Translate widget on the Liberal Party's website, and a brief sentence by one candidate informing website visitors to use their web browser's controls to adjust the text size. The Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, noted that their UK-wide manifesto (as opposed to the Scottish version) was available, on request, in a number of different formats and languages.

Finally, in terms of information provision, two candidates (both MPs in the 2005-2010 UK Parliament) were obviously conscious of the public outrage caused by the expenses scandal which emerged during the previous parliamentary term and which resulted in 389 MPs being asked to repay a total of over £1 million of expenses. In a proactive attempt to increase transparency and trust, their websites provided full details of their expenses claimed during the previous two years.

Communication and interactivity

Of the 18 parties with a website, 15 provided some method of online contact in the form of either a general enquiries email address or a web-based enquiry form. The exceptions were the minority parties, the Landless Peasants and the Scottish Jacobites, and, as with the 2007 study, the Scottish Socialist Party. With the candidates' websites, all but one provided an online contact facility.

Table III illustrates the individual candidates' contact details provided on the websites of the four major parties. As can be seen, while the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties made some effort to include candidates' personal email addresses, online (and other) contact details for Conservative candidates were negligible, and non-existent in the case of the SNP. This situation is somewhat different from that encountered in 2007, when the Conservatives were the only major party to provide candidates' email addresses. As it was not known if the lack of candidate contact details was a deliberate strategy on the part of the Conservatives and SNP to discourage the Scottish public from making direct, personal contact with candidates, or if it perhaps reflected a desire for centralised communication, the researchers contacted the two parties after the election in an attempt to establish their rationale. However, perhaps unsurprisingly (as will become apparent later), neither party responded to this question.

Table III: Contact details for constituency candidates on the four major parties' websites				
Candidates' details	Labour (n=59)	SNP (n=59)	Lib Dems (n=59)	Conservative (n=58)
Email address	41	0	31	5
Postal address	40	0	24	2
Telephone number	50	0	20	1

Amongst the smaller parties, too, there appeared to be something of a reluctance to provide candidates' contact details. Of the parties presenting ten or more candidates (see Table IV), the Greens and UKIP were the only ones to enable direct online

contact with individual candidates, the latter via a series of web-based enquiry forms; the provision of postal addresses and telephone numbers was negligible amongst all parties. It is perhaps understandable why the far-right BNP chose not to provide candidate addresses and contact details. Indeed, during the campaign, the Glasgow Anti-Fascist Alliance posted photographs of the 13 BNP candidates on the Alliance's Facebook page (candidate photos were not, of course, provided on the BNP website), while also issuing an appeal for the email and postal addresses and the telephone numbers of the BNP candidates for the Glasgow constituencies. The current authors suspect that this information was not sought primarily to enable considered policy debate.

Table IV: Contact details for constituency candidates on the websites of the five other parties fielding ten or more candidates

Candidates' details	BNP (n=13)	Green (n=20)	SSP (n=10)	TUSC (n=10)	UKIP (n=27)
Email address or individual online contact form	0	20	0	0	27
Postal address	0	0	0	0	1
Telephone number	0	1	0	0	0

As was the case in both 2003 and 2007, there was an apparent reluctance amongst the Scottish political parties in 2010 to encourage any form of active online public debate via their websites. Just three party websites – those of the BNP, the Landless Peasants and the Pirate Party – provided some form of online discussion forum. All three were national, UK-wide sites and required an additional registration process to post comments, or, in the BNP's case, to view existing posts. The BNP and Pirate Party also provided real-time chat facilities, again requiring registration. Amongst the 12 individual candidates, only one, an independent candidate, made provision for online discussion, and while he had attempted to initiate debates on a range of topics, no postings were made by website visitors. Interestingly, one Green Party candidate planned to hold what were described as two “experimental Skype-In Slots” on the two days immediately preceding the election, one for first time voters, the other for people in remote or island communities. Here, potential voters could email the candidate in advance to arrange a one-to-one phone discussion over the Internet using the Skype software application.

Membership and donations

Following a growing trend, identified during the 2005 UK general election, of British political actors using the Internet as a resource generation tool (see, for example, Jackson, 2007), the current authors' 2007 study observed that Scottish political party websites were providing far more opportunities than in 2003 for party supporters to actively become part of the campaign. This pattern appeared to continue during the 2010 campaign. Thirteen of the 18 parties provided an online party membership form, while seven provided an online volunteering or “pledge of support” form. Fourteen party and four candidate websites allowed users to make online donations to the party, while seven party sites contained online shops selling, for example, party t-shirts, mugs and memory sticks. However, 2010 also saw a noticeable decrease (4 of 18, compared with 13 of 27 in 2007) in the number of party websites providing free,

downloadable, “traditional” campaign materials, such as leaflets and window posters. This suggests a move away from the mutual exchange of support between political actors and supporters: although the parties and candidates appeared anxious to obtain financial and manual support via their websites, they seemed less willing to provide anything in return.

Audiovisual features

Compared with the previous two studies, parties and candidates were also making more use of audiovisual features, particularly video clips, on their websites during the 2010 campaign. Fifteen of the 18 parties and 7 of the 12 candidates provided video clips of, for example, election broadcasts and speeches (these figures exclude those parties and individuals who had created dedicated YouTube channels, which are discussed later); two parties and one candidate also offered audio podcasts of election addresses. Six parties and three candidates also provided “photo galleries” containing images of various meetings, visits and rallies. The 2010 campaign also saw the emergence of two online features not encountered during the previous studies: one party and two candidates used the Google Map application to illustrate the locations of past and forthcoming campaign events, such as public meetings and door-to-door canvassing; two party websites contained a widget which gave a real-time countdown, in days, hours and seconds, to the opening of the polling stations on 6 May.

In contrast, one audiovisual feature encountered in 2007 but lacking in 2010 was the online TV station. During the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary campaign, both the SNP and the BNP broadcast live TV over the Internet each evening; however, none of the Scottish parties adopted this approach during the 2010 UK Parliamentary contest. While the success of these TV stations in 2007, in terms of viewing figures, is unclear, the parties’ preference in 2010 for providing only video clips suggests perhaps a lack of sufficient content to make daily broadcasts viable, or that the electorate prefers to watch election broadcasts at their own convenience, rather than at predetermined programme times.

Other interactive features

Although there was a slight increase in the use of other types of interactive features, compared with 2007, these were still relatively uncommon. Three party websites contained petitions that could be signed online, for example: against part-privatising the Post Office (SNP); demanding a referendum on EU membership (UKIP); and campaigning for free public transport for all (SSP). One candidate website also contained an online petition, to “stop supermarkets taking over” a local town centre. Online surveys and polls appeared on the websites of one party (the SNP, on voting intentions) and four candidates (largely on very specific local issues), while four parties offered postcode-based searches where users could input their postcode and be presented with details of the local candidates and/or elected members (i.e., local councillors, MSPs and MEPs) from that party.

Analysis of social media use by parties and candidates

As indicated above, although blogs were emerging as an electioneering tool during the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary contest, other social media such as Facebook and Twitter were in their relative infancy and played no real part in the campaign. The 2010 UK

election, therefore, was the first in which more widespread use of social media by parties and candidates was anticipated.

However, just 7 of the 20 parties contesting the election in Scotland were found to have one or more distinctly *Scottish* social media sites, giving a total of 21 sites: YouTube (used by 6 parties), Facebook (5), Twitter (5), Bebo (1), Flickr (1), fotobabble (1), Plixi (1) and Twitpic (1). Three of these sites went under the name of the party's leader or election campaign manager in Scotland, but were, to all intents and purposes, party rather than personal sites. In terms of the numbers of "friends", "likers" or "followers" of these party sites on the election day of 6 May, these were relatively modest, ranging from 96 on the Scottish Jacobites' Facebook page, to 3,305 on that of the SNP, the latter figure being equivalent to just 0.085 per cent of the 2010 Scottish electorate (in comparison, the Conservatives' UK-wide Facebook page had 88,093 "likers" by 6 May, i.e., 0.193 per cent of the UK electorate).[1]

The party Facebook sites were examined more closely in terms of the features used in each one. Although most of the five parties utilised the Wall, Information, Photos and Videos features, only one (the Liberal Democrats) used the Events application to promote forthcoming campaign activities, and while three of the parties attempted to initiate debate using the Discussions feature, this had met with minimal success. Interestingly, only the Scottish Jacobites allowed visitors to post a message to their Facebook sites without having first joined or "liked" the party site; thus any floating voters wishing to engage or interact with the other parties via Facebook could only do so if they explicitly displayed support for those parties.

With regard to the parties' Twitter sites, Table V outlines the activity on each one by the end of the campaign period. As can be seen, while the Scottish Labour Party had the most followers, they were the least active in terms of the number of tweets emerging during the campaign.

Table V: Activity on Scottish party Twitter sites			
Party	Followers at 6 May	Tweets at 6 May	Campaign tweets
Labour	1,224	659	65
SNP	1,006	789	432
Liberal Democrats	562	608	119
Conservative (David McLetchie)	223	236	220
Scottish Greens	Not known ¹	21	21

¹ The Scottish Greens' Twitter site was launched midway through the campaign, on 22 April 2010, and was only discovered by the researchers in the post-election period; therefore the number of followers on election day is not known.

Meanwhile, 129 (37.2%) of the 347 candidates were found to be using one or more social media applications, resulting in 227 active sites. Table VI illustrates the number of individual candidates, by party, using social media applications during the campaign. Of the four major parties, the Liberal Democrat candidates appeared to be those most willing to embrace social media (a trend replicated throughout the UK, according to Newman (2010)), closely followed by those from the SNP and Labour;

the Conservatives seemed least inclined to use such applications. As can be seen, of the 129 candidates using social media, a significant proportion (59; 46%) employed two or more different types of application.

Table VI: Number of candidates using social media applications				
Candidate's party	Using one applications	Using two applications	Using three or more applications	Total
Labour	14	6	6	26
SNP	15	6	7	28
Liberal Democrat	17	6	9	32
Conservative	5	5	6	16
BNP	3	-	-	3
Scottish Green	4	3	1	8
SSP	4	-	-	4
UKIP	4	2	-	6
Other	4	2	-	6
Totals	70	30	29	129

In terms of the types of social media, Table VII indicates that most candidates used either Twitter (76) and/or Facebook (73). Forty-four candidates maintained a blog, while 10 had created their own channel on YouTube. Smaller numbers had accounts on Twitpic (8 candidates), Plixi (5), Flickr (4), Bebo (2), yfrog (2), Google Buzz (1), MySpace (1) or Twitgoo (1).

Table VII: Types of social media applications used by candidates						
Candidate party	Blogs	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube channels	Others	Total
Labour	7	16	15	3	6	47
SNP	12	18	13	3	2	48
Liberal Democrats	7	19	24	2	8	60
Conservative	5	10	13	2	6	36
BNP	3	-	-	-	-	3
Green	2	3	6	-	2	13
SSP	2	2	-	-	-	4
UKIP	3	1	4	-	-	8
Other	3	4	1	-	-	8
Totals	44	73	76	10	24	227

As was the case with the parties, the individual candidates with Facebook sites tended to use the Wall, Information, and Photos features most frequently. Just 14 of the 73 candidates used the Events feature to announce forthcoming campaign activities, and while 17 had attempted to encourage online debate using the Discussions feature, these efforts had largely proved fruitless. The numbers of “friends” of the individual candidates varied even more dramatically than those of the parties, from the two “friends” of one Conservative hopeful, to the 4,358 linked with the page of one prominent Liberal Democrat MP. In terms of personal information and contact details, 67 of the 73 candidates provided photographs of themselves, but only 25 included any biographical details. Half (37) provided a personal email address, but only 13 allowed

site visitors to send a message to the candidate without joining or “liking” the page. As was the case with the parties’ sites, then, explicit support for an individual candidate is usually expected before any engagement via Facebook can take place.

With regard to the candidates’ Twitter sites, 65 of the 76 candidates with a site provided personal photographs, while 60 provided some biographical details, albeit within the 160-character limit imposed in the “Bio” element of Twitter user profiles.

Table VIII: Activity on candidates’ Twitter sites (n=76)									
Party	Followers at 6 May			Tweets at 6 May			Campaign tweets		
	Min.	Max.	Ave.	Min.	Max.	Ave.	Min.	Max.	Ave.
Labour	8	3,528	743	0	4,993	741	0	562	133
SNP	9	572	155	2	438	106	0	116	35
Liberal Democrats	9	3,329	506	3	11,007	833	0	722	108
Conservative	7	858	195	5	759	205	0	95	18
Others	10	735	120	4	4,111	463	2	564	90
All parties	7	3,528	383	0	11,007	529	0	722	81

Table VIII provides an overview of the extent of activity on the 76 candidate Twitter sites. As can be seen, the number of followers each individual had ranged widely, from the seven following one Conservative candidate, to the 3,528 following a current Labour MP. Unsurprisingly, the number of tweets each one produced during the campaign also varied dramatically: seven individuals, despite having their candidacy displayed clearly on their Twitter page, failed to tweet at all during the five weeks, while one prolific Liberal Democrat candidate produced over 700 tweets during the course of the contest.

As was stated earlier, a more in-depth analysis of the *nature* of the information provision and exchange on these Twitter and Facebook sites, and on candidate blogs, is currently being undertaken. The authors’ initial impressions, however, are of a largely one-way flow of information from the parties and candidates, with little evidence of any two-way discussion and interaction. There is also evidence to suggest that, with the exception of some of the more prominent candidates (mostly existing MPs seeking re-election), the “friends” and “followers” of these social media sites were largely known, personal associates of the candidates and/or party supporters, members and activists. Thus, it would appear that the parties and candidates were generally “preaching to the converted”, rather than providing opportunities for objective, critical, online debate with the wider electorate.

Enquiry responsiveness test

Email enquiries

As part of the final element of the study, email questions, based around a wide variety of topical campaign issues, were directed at parties and candidates. To the parties, for example, questions were sent regarding: their plans to ensure that candidates would not become embroiled in any further expenses improprieties, if elected; their use of negative campaigning techniques and celebrity endorsements; and clarification of rather vague manifesto statements, on subjects ranging from national insurance contributions to high-speed rail networks. Questions to the candidates, meanwhile,

were more targeted and tailored, and often related to their localities and personal circumstances. For example, where personal email addresses could be found, a question was sent to those candidates who, as MPs in the previous parliament, had been forced to repay expenses, asking what steps they would take to ensure correct and proper claims in the future, if re-elected; candidates in the North East of Scotland were sent questions relating to two high-profile and controversial building developments proposed for the area. The youngest of the candidates seeking election were sent questions about what life experience and gravitas they could bring to the role of an MP.

The authors sent a total of 71 email enquiries in the 2010 study: 32 to the political parties, and 39 to individual candidates. This was a significantly lower number than that (128) sent in the 2007 study, largely because in the 2010 study the researchers also sought to ask questions via social media applications (of which more is discussed below). In total, 31 replies of some kind were received: 11 from parties and 20 from candidates, giving an overall response rate of 44 per cent. This was slightly down on the 2007 response rate of 47 per cent, and when compared also with that in the 2003 study (53%), suggests a gradual decline in the responsiveness of Scottish political actors over the last seven years. In particular, the level of response from the parties has dropped markedly from 84 per cent in 2003 to 34 per cent in 2010 (see Figure 1).

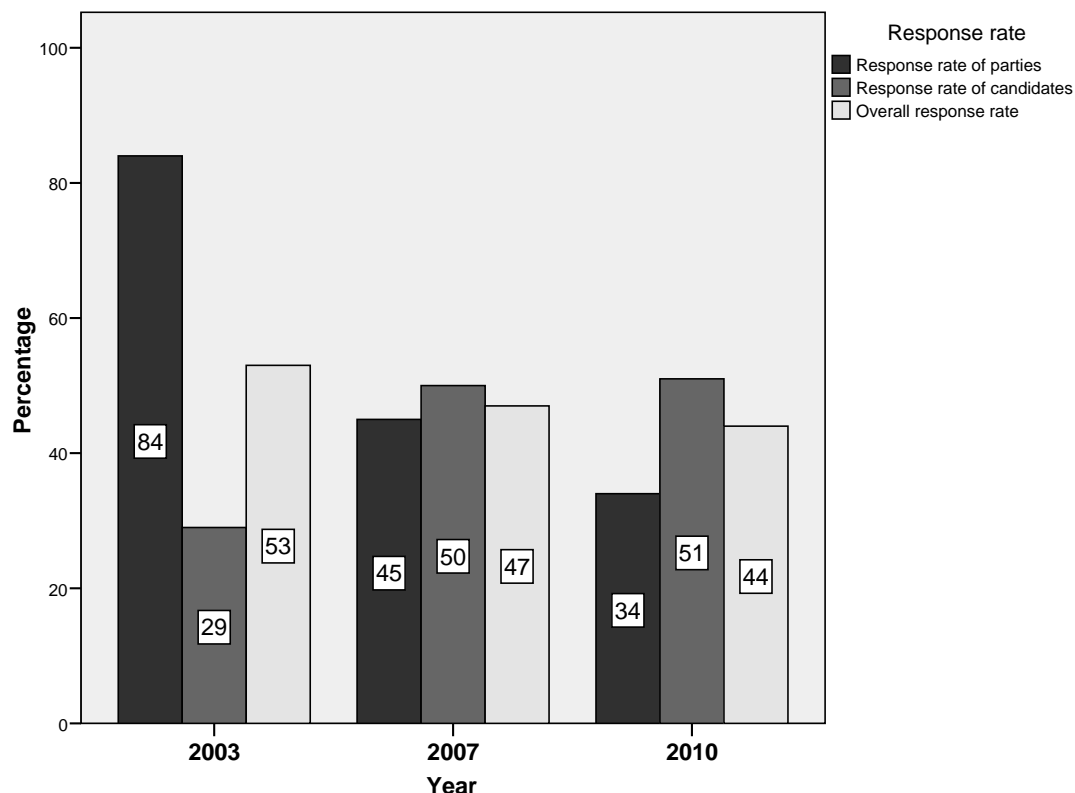


Figure 1: Responsiveness to email enquiries: comparison between 2003, 2007 and 2010

With regard to the speed of response, 55 per cent of the parties and 50 per cent of the candidates who replied did so on the same day as the enquiry was sent, while 64 per cent of the parties and 75 per cent of the candidates responded within two days. The longest delay, from both a party and a candidate, was six days.

The best party response came from the Labour Party, who responded to all six questions received; in comparison the SNP responded to two of six, and the Liberal Democrats to one of four. The least impressive performance, though, was that of the Conservative Party, who failed to answer any of the eight questions sent. Indeed, the Conservatives' apparent unwillingness to correspond with the electorate by email was such that when the researchers notified them by email of contradictory candidate details appearing on their Scottish and UK websites, although the website details were corrected immediately, the party chose not to give the courtesy of an acknowledgement or reply. It was interesting to note, then, that the director of strategy and communications for the Scottish Conservatives left "by mutual consent" in June 2010, in the immediate aftermath of what turned out to be a particularly disappointing election result for the party in Scotland (Rose, 2010). Indeed, the report of an independent post-election commission established by the Scottish Conservatives noted "a widespread acceptance across the Party that the advantages of electronic communications and "new media" are not being utilised in campaigning, communications and the Party's operations overall" (Scottish Conservatives 2010 Commission, 2010, p. 35).

In terms of the individual candidates, the Scottish Greens (two replies to two enquiries) and the SNP (four replies to five enquiries) could perhaps be described as the most responsive; contrastingly the response rate of the Liberal Democrat candidates (three responses to 12 questions) left most to be desired.

From those parties and candidates who did respond to the enquiries, the extent and the content of the replies varied widely, from the curt and not particularly informative, to those that were constructive, responsive and detailed, as well as those that were merely standard "copy and paste" replies taken from party manifestos or other policy literature. Generally, it was the major parties who adopted the copy and paste method, although in 2010 this approach was less obvious than in the two previous studies where parties had often provided replies containing a variety of different font styles and sizes, reflecting the different sources from which the text had been copied.

Continuing a phenomenon first encountered during the 2007 study, three candidates (all of them Labour MPs in the 2005-2010 Parliament) requested details of the enquirer's postal address (to establish if they lived in their prospective parliamentary constituency) and implied that a fuller response would only be provided on confirmation of that address. As Norton (2007) notes, this practice is far from unusual, and relates presumably to Jackson's (2004) finding that, for 55 per cent of MPs and 64 per cent of MSPs (Members of the Scottish Parliament), over half of the emails they receive come from non-constituents. One other candidate, when sent a question on one of the proposed developments in North-East Scotland, appeared particularly cautious in his initial response, asking the enquirer to state if they were

“involved with one side or the other, the media, or a political party” before agreeing to provide an answer.

The question to individual candidates on MPs’ expenses provided the most interesting reaction. Despite having been forced to repay some expenses, few of the respondents appeared to display any signs of remorse. Instead, they chose either to blame others, emphasise that their own repayments were due to minor administrative oversights, highlight their overall performance in terms of expenses claims, or contrast their own party’s misdemeanours with that of their political rivals:

The repayment of expenses you refer to were a result of administrative errors by the House of Commons Department of Resources.

The money I had to repay was because it was claimed in the wrong financial year rather than not being a valid claim.

I was asked to repay some mobile phone bills as they had been claimed on the wrong form.

I have always been in the lower bracket on average at around 470th out of 645 MPs on the expenses table.

You may be pleased to know that last year I was the lowest claiming backbench MP in Scotland.

Neither myself or any of my SNP colleagues have been involved in flipping [2] or any of the serious calculated abuses that have so angered the public.

Overall, though, there was little evidence of personal engagement through the email enquiries. Indeed, it is perhaps fair to say that it was only a small number of the candidates from the minority parties, with little chance of electoral success, who appeared willing to initiate further discussion and debate with the enquirer. In this respect, the 2010 results were little different from those in both the 2003 and 2007 studies.

Facebook enquiries

For the first time, the 2010 study sought to direct questions at candidates using social media applications. As was indicated above, just 13 of the 73 candidates with a Facebook site allowed visitors to send a message to the candidate without joining or “liking” the site. As five of these individuals had already been sent enquiries by email, the researchers sent questions via Facebook to the other eight candidates, largely on whether or not the local electorate was expressing concerns about the prospect of a hung parliament (which opinion polls suggested was likely). Four of the eight candidates responded, providing a similar response rate to that achieved by email. While this appears encouraging, suggesting that Facebook might be a potentially useful medium with which to interact with political actors, the responses themselves tended to be very brief and offered little evidence of a desire to engage further with the enquirer.

Twitter enquiries

Efforts were also made to ask questions of candidates via Twitter, within the 140-character constraint of the application. Just days into the election campaign, the Scottish Labour Party de-selected one of its candidates after he was found to have made a string of offensive comments on his Twitter page. The researchers, therefore, sent 15 candidates, from across all parties, a question on whether or not this event had affected the way in which they personally were using Twitter during the campaign. Subsequently, a further 15 candidates were sent a question on the main issues being raised by voters when the candidates were out canvassing. Unfortunately, not one response was received from any of the 30 candidates. Indeed, one Conservative candidate, on receiving a question, immediately “blocked” one of the researchers from following his Twitter account. This certainly suggests that Scottish political actors are particularly reluctant to use Twitter as a vehicle for answering questions from “followers”, or at least from those with whom they are personally unfamiliar. With this in mind, as part of the more detailed analysis of parties’ and candidates’ social media use currently being undertaken, the researchers will be looking for any evidence of responsiveness towards questions asked using the Twitter application.

Conclusions and further research

The findings of this study suggest that there has been some progress made by Scottish political actors over the last three years in terms of their use of the Internet as a campaigning tool. During the 2010 UK general election campaign, party and candidate websites were being used more extensively for the generation of funds, and for the recruitment of members and volunteers; more detailed information about individual candidates was provided, especially on the larger parties’ websites, and the use of audiovisual features, particularly video clips, became more prevalent. Some parties and candidates had also begun to incorporate newer technologies into their websites, such as social bookmarking features and real-time feeds from social media sites. Equally, however, information in alternative languages and formats was sadly lacking and parties and candidates failed to regularly update the content of their websites during the campaign, resulting in somewhat stagnant sites which were unlikely to attract repeated visits from the electorate.

Parties and candidates still appear reluctant to encourage online contact or to enter into any kind of visible online debate; they remain unwilling to respond fully to potential voters’ email questions on contentious and “difficult” policy issues, with 56 per cent of the researchers’ questions being ignored completely. As a recent survey by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) suggested that 36 per cent of the Scottish public would welcome more opportunities to interact online with politicians and political parties (NESTA, 2010), this current pattern of provision and response is unfortunate and unlikely to encourage an already apathetic and cynical electorate to participate more fully in the democratic process.

Those in the Scottish political sphere did appear keen to be seen embracing new social media tools, with 35 per cent of parties and 37 per cent of candidates utilising blogs, Facebook or Twitter during the electoral campaign. However, initial analysis suggests that these were being used primarily for the one-way provision of information to known associates and party activists. Perhaps influenced by previous high-profile errors of judgement, by politicians and other public figures, Scottish political actors

appeared particularly nervous about using social media to respond to questions or to allow any two-way discussion and interaction with the wider electorate.

As it is anticipated that many of the unsuccessful candidates in the 2010 UK general election will stand for election to the Scottish Parliament in May 2011, the authors propose to replicate this study during the Scottish Parliamentary campaign, and investigate whether recent election failure has any obvious and immediate impact on the ways in which the Internet is used for campaigning purposes. In addition, given the apparent desire of a significant proportion of the Scottish electorate to interact online with political actors (NESTA, 2010), the authors propose to undertake some research on the online information needs and information-seeking behaviour of potential voters in Scotland during the 2011 campaign. In particular, this research will explore what tools, technologies and processes the public most value in seeking to engage more fully with their prospective MSPs.

Notes

1. The Electoral Commission's *UK general election 2010: turnout and administrative data*, available at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/results/general_elections (accessed 19 January 2011) states that the electorate in Scotland was 3,863,042, whilst that of the UK as a whole was 45,597,461.
2. "Flipping" is a word which describes the practice by which politicians switched or "flipped" the designation of their "principal" and "second" residences, allowing them to furnish and redecorate different homes at the expense of the taxpayer.

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Appendix: Party and candidate website analyses

Feature	Political Party (see key to party acronyms below)																	
Information Provision	LAB	LD	SNP	CON	BNP ^{1,2}	COM	GRN	LIB ¹	LP ¹	PIR ¹	SACL	SCHP ¹	SJP	SLP ¹	SSP	TP ¹	TUSC ¹	UKIP ¹
Candidate list	●	●	●	●	⊙	●	●	●	●	●		⊙	●	●	●	●	●	●
Election manifesto	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		⊙		●	●		●	●
Other policy statements/info	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	⊙	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Campaign agenda/calendar	⊙					⊙								⊙	⊙			
Updated campaign news	●	●	●	●	⊙	⊙	●	⊙	⊙	⊙		⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	●	⊙
E-news service	●	●			●		●					●						●
RSS feeds		●	●		●		●		●	●								●
Real-time feeds from party social media sites				●	●		●			●								
Social bookmarking buttons	●				●					⊙		●						
Links to other party sites	●	●	●	●	●	●	●			●		●	●		●			●
Blogs			⊙	●	⊙		⊙			⊙								
'How to vote' information																		
Info in alternative formats/languages	⊙	⊙						⊙										
Search facility	●	●	●	●	⊙		●	●	●									●
Communication and interactivity																		
Online contact/questions	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●	●		●		●	●	●
Candidates' contact details	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙		⊙	●			●					⊙			●
Discussion fora					⊙				●	●								
Realtime chat facilities					●					●								
Membership, Donations, etc.																		

Online membership form	●	●	●		●	⊙	●	⊙	●	●		⊙			⊙		⊙	●
Online volunteer/pledge form	●		●	●	●							●				●	⊙	
Online donations	●	●	●	●	●		●	⊙	●	●		●	●	●			●	●
Online shop	●		●	●	⊙					●				●				●
Download campaign materials		●														●	●	●
Audiovisual features																		
Photo galleries				●					●			●	⊙	⊙	⊙		●	⊙
Video clips and podcasts	●	●	●	●	●	⊙	●		●		⊙	●		⊙	●	●	●	●
Audio clips and podcasts						⊙				●								
Google Map features	●																	
Election countdown widgets			●										●					
Other interactive features																		
Online surveys and polls			●															
Online petitions			●												●			●
Postcode-based search	●	●	⊙															●

Notes:

¹ National (UK) site only.

² Due to an internal party dispute, the BNP website was taken down on 5 May 2010, the day before the election, and was replaced hastily on Election Day with a Facebook page. This analysis was based on the original website.

Key to symbols

● Represents a feature which appeared to be complete, updated regularly, and/or fully “online”.

⊙ Represents a feature which was incomplete, not updated regularly, and/or not fully “online”.

Feature	Candidate and Political Party (see key to party acronyms below)											
Information Provision	A LAB ¹	B LAB	C LD ¹	D LD	E SNP ¹	F SNP	G CON ¹	H CON	I GRN	J PIR	K SSP	L IND
Biographical details		●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●	●
Personal policy statements/information		●		●		●	●			●	●	●
Party manifesto or policy statements		●										N/A
Personal campaign agenda/calendar				●			⊙		●		●	
Updated personal campaign news	●	⊙	●	⊙	⊙	●	●	⊙	⊙			
Mailing list/e-news service					●	●						
Download newsletters, press cuttings, etc.		●	●		●			●				
RSS feeds			●	●		●			●	●		●
Blogs	⊙					●		⊙	⊙		⊙	
Link to personal social media sites	●	●	●	●		●		●	●			●
Real-time feeds from personal social media sites				●				●				
Link to party/constituency sites		●	●			●	●	●	●	●		N/A
Real-time feeds from other sites			●			●						
Social bookmarking		●		●		●					●	●
“How to vote” information	⊙	●	⊙	⊙			⊙	●				
Declaration of interests information							●					
Personal expenses information			●		●							
Information in alternative formats/languages			⊙									
Search facility	●		●	●				●		●		●
Word cloud tagging and links				●								
Communication and interactivity												
Online contact/questions	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Discussion fora												⊙
Skype “phone-in” facility									●			
Membership, Donations, etc.												
Online volunteer/pledge form				●								
Online donations		●	●	●							●	
Download campaign materials		●						●				●
Audiovisual features												
Photo galleries		●				●		●				
Personal video clips and podcasts	●		●			●	●	●			●	
Personal audio clips and podcasts			⊙									
Other video clips		●				●	●	●			●	
Google Map features							●	⊙				
Other interactive features												
Online surveys and polls	●	●	●					●				
Online petitions			●									

Notes: ¹ Existing MP (i.e., in 2005-2010 UK Parliament)

Key to party acronyms

BNP	British National Party
COM	Scottish Communists
CON	Conservative Party
GRN	Scottish Green Party
LAB	Labour Party
LD	Liberal Democrats
LIB	Liberal Party
LP	Landless Peasants Party
PIR	Pirate Party
SACL	Scotland Against Crooked Lawyers
SCHP	Scottish Christian Party
SJP	Scottish Jacobite Party
SLP	Socialist Labour Party
SNP	Scottish National Party
SSP	Scottish Socialist Party
TP	Trust Party
TUSC	Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition
UKIP	UK Independence Party
IND	Independent candidate

The two other parties contesting the election in Scotland, the Communist League and the Joy of Talk Party, had no website presence during the campaign.